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Abram Pigeon Spar-making Memoir
Inclusive dates 1891- circa 1921

by
Nathan R. Lipfert

March 2016

Two volumes
Accession # 2006.087.01

A PART OF THE CAPTAIN W. J. LEWIS PARKER BEQUEST

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Abstract

Pigeon, Abram (1844 – ca. 1928)

Spar-making memoir, 1891 - circa 1921

Two volumes

Spar maker of Boston MA.

A memoir of life in the spar-making trade, written in the blank pages of two financial record books of the Pigeon spar business.

Bequeathed by Capt. W. J. Lewis Parker in 2006.

MS-466; Accession # 2006.087.01

Finding aid in repository; folder and item level control.

Added entries—people

Caldwell, Joseph

Childs, Robert

Morrill, Folsom

Milton, William

Patchin, Aaron W.

Pigeon, Henry Jr.

Pigeon, Henry Sr.

Wood, Peter

Added entries—places

Boston (MA)

Brantford (ONT)

Clearfield County (PA)

Hamilton (ONT)

Port Deposit (MD)

Seattle (WA)

Added entries—corporate bodies (including vessels)

Allen, Pigeon & Pool

Gerard C. Tobey (Bark)

H. Pigeon & Sons

Henry Pigeon

Olympic (Four-mast jackass bark)

Pigeon & Odiorne

Pigeon & Pool

Sintram (Ship)

Snow & Burgess (Ship)

William J. Rotch (Ship)

Added entries—key terms

Mast trade

Masts and rigging

Sparmaking

Acquisition

The papers of Abram Pigeon and his family's spar business were bequeathed to Maine Maritime Museum from the estate of Capt. W. J. Lewis Parker in November and December 2006.

Provenance

Capt. Parker was an extremely knowledgeable collector. He picked up many parts of his collection of maritime papers by purchase from dealers, auctions, or estate sales, and by gifts from relatives of maritime figures. We have found no documentation of how he acquired this particular group of manuscripts. These papers were found in his study with other similar items, and were part of his maritime library which he bequeathed to Maine Maritime Museum.

Restrictions

There are no restrictions on the use of these materials for study or research. Researchers should seek permission to obtain copies, and for publication of any sort.

Physical Condition

These volumes have the usual surface dirt and minor tears of late 19th-century documents. They are acidic, and many pages are broken, and the bindings are shaken or coming apart. Overall, the Abram Pigeon papers are in fair condition.

Biographical/Historical Notes

In 1830 Henry Pigeon established a spar-making business called Pigeon & Pool. In 1832, with the investment of another partner, they erected a spar building in East Boston, near the foot of Summer Street, on the east side of what was later the D. D. Kelley rail way. They did business as Allen, Pigeon & Pool for a few years, until Mr. Allen retired and the firm was once again Pigeon & Pool. Mr. Pool retired in 1852, and the firm became Henry Pigeon until John Odiorne joined a few years later. The partnership was called Pigeon & Odiorne until 1861. With the start of the Civil War, Mr. Odiorne became very discouraged about the prospects for American shipping, and in 1866 he sold his share in the business to Henry Pigeon's sons, Henry Jr. and Abram.

The firm then did business as H. Pigeon & Sons. Starting about 1870, Abram Pigeon served as a roving partner for the firm, traveling around the continent searching for and buying suitable trees for the making of masts and other spars, and preparing them for shipment by rail, canal, or ship back to the firm's spar yard in Boston.

Abram Pigeon traveled to Pennsylvania and Maryland, doing business with Aaron W. Patchin. Later he ventured to Hamilton and Brantford in Ontario, Canada, buying from Peter Wood and William Milton. By the 1890s he was going to the Northwest, in business Robert Childs of Seattle (WA). In Boston the firm worked in the 1870s with Folsom Morrill. In 1893 the Pigeons formed a syndicate with Joseph Caldwell of Boston, to market the Oregon pine timbers that were coming around Cape Horn by ship. In the Sewall Family Papers (MS-22, b102f18) the Pigeons are still writing on H. Pigeon & Sons stationery, but signing as the Boston Oregon Mast Company.

Abram Pigeon was proud of his work to expand the business, believing he was the first person in the spar business to scout for spars in the "Western forest" (meaning Ontario at the time). Besides Boston area shipyards, he found markets for the spars in Gloucester, in Portland, in Bath, and other towns in Maine. He regretted spending so much time away from his family, but felt he needed to do this and knew his father and brother were not going to do it. By the early 1890s he was traveling to the Northwest for trees. Traveling by rail he still spent months away from Boston, but returned sooner than the spars, which came by ship.

From the accounts in this collection, the Pigeons sold spars to the following Maine shipyards, among others: New England Co.; Arthur Sewall & Co.; Kelley, Spear Co.; C. & G. M. Hodgdon; Carlton Norwood & Co.; Cobb, Butler & Co.; John McDonald; William Rogers; and New England Ship Building Co.

All the vessels mentioned in these two volumes as bringing spar cargoes around the Horn for the Pigeons were built in Maine.

Gerard C. Tobey (Bark), built Bath (Goss, Sawyer & Packard) 1878
Olympic (Four-mast jackass bark), built Bath (New England Co.) 1892
Sintram (Ship), built South Freeport (Soule) 1877
Snow & Burgess (Ship), built Thomaston (Watts) 1878
William J. Rotch (Ship), built Bath (Goss, Sawyer & Packard) 1881

Abram (sometimes called Abraham, but Abram by his own testimony) Pigeon was born in April 1844 at Boston. He married Amanda S. Turner at Provincetown in February, 1867. They are believed to have had seven children, some of whom died young. Amanda may have died in 1908, in any case before the 1910 census. In the memoir, Abram regrets the long periods he spent away from his family, which consisted of his wife, oldest son, and a daughter at the

time he began traveling. At the time he wrote the memoir, all three of them were dead.

In the 1910 census, Abram is widowed, and still working as a spar maker. By 1920, he is listed as a partner in a spar yard, and his son Fred L., with whom he is living, is the manager of the spar yard. The details of Abram's death are vague, but he may be the Abraham Pigeon who died at Gloucester (MA) in 1928. He did sell a lot of spars to Gloucester, and he was not in the 1930 census.

Later, Abram's younger son Guy would take over the spar yard. The name of the firm changed to the Pigeon Hollow Spar Company, but it still did business in East Boston. Guy retired about 1967 and died in 1970. His Boston Herald obituary said he was the last spar maker in East Boston, so presumably the business closed about 1967

Scope and Content Notes

This collection consists of two small ledger volumes with pre-printed lines: blue horizontal line and red vertical column lines.

Ship "Wm. J. Rotch" Journal

The first volume is titled "Ship Wm. J. Rotch Journal." The first 26 numbered pages record the sale of masts, "sticks," planks, shingles and other items to various numbered and named accounts, including many shipyards. The handwriting is extremely neat, in pen. The sales begin in February 1891 and continue through May 1892.

Starting on numbered page 29, inscribed "No. 1, East Boston January 6th [19]21," is Abram Pigeon's memoir of his experiences with the Pigeon family spar business. It is written in pencil, not nearly as neatly as the earlier accounts. It continues to the last numbered page, 98, and for three additional unnumbered pages.

The memoir contains almost no information about the process of making spars from logs. It is all about business conditions, the making of business deals, the abilities of other family members, and the author's experiences in traveling to Pennsylvania and Ontario to acquire trees for the business. There is some discussion of relative sizes of sticks acquired in different places and times.

Cash of Cargo, pr Bark "Gerard C. Toby" (sic)

The second volume is titled “Toby Cash” and “Cash of Cargo, pr Bark Gerard C. Toby (sic).” The first four numbered pages record receipts of payments, from numbered and named accounts, for material from the *Tobey*’s cargo, from September 1890 to September 1892. It appears to be written in the same neat hand as the first volume.

On page 5 begins Abram Pigeon’s penciled account again. This page is all scribbled out, and the next three leaves are cut out. The penciled memoir begins again on page 12, with the inscription “No. 3, 1892.” This script continues until page 80, with some additional writing on page 83. The remaining numbered pages, which run up to 142, are blank.

This portion of the memoir covers Abram Pigeon’s development of sources of mast trees in Washington and Oregon, and the origins of the Boston Oregon Mast Company. It begins in 1892 and appears to cover the next decade fairly well, with one reference as late as 1911.

Other:

Since the text in the first volume is labeled “No. 1” and the second volume is “No. 3,” there would appear to have been a No. 2, covering perhaps the 1880s, which does not survive or is not in our possession, in any case. The text does not wrap things up neatly at the end of No. 3, but we doubt there was a number 4, since there are so many blank pages left in No. 3. Presumably, the author did not finish the memoir, at least in this form.